THE GOLDEN WEB

By
ANTHONY PARTRIDGE
Author of
"Passers-By," "The Kingdom of Earth," "The Distributers," &c.

CHAPTER VI.

An Opportune Arrival.

WITH his feet to the sea, and his head pillowed by many cushions, Rowan lay in a long invalid chair at the edge of the little strip of shingle which separated the tower of Rakney from the sea. Every limb was at rest, every nerve seemed lulled into quiescence. The sun and wind had left their traces upon his hollow cheeks. It seemed, indeed, as though Death had lifted her hand from his forehead. It was only when one looked closer that one realized his terrible weakness, realized how slender, indeed, the thread was by which he held on to life. There was scarcely a breath of wind stirring. The sun was high in the heavens, and the whole country seemed lulled into a state of almost unnatural repose. The distant trees were motionless, as though, indeed, they were simply painted things against that background of deep blue sky. The smoke from the little cluster of cottages crept upward, straight as a ruled line. The cattle in the fields seemed all asleep, exhausted by the unexpected heat. The sea was like a lake, unruffled, almost unrippled.

The man dozed, and Winifred sat by his side, with her eyes fixed steadily and yet absently upon the distant horizon. A week, at most, the doctor had given him, and after that—what? She looked backward to the window—the window through which she had entered on that wild night earlier in the year. She looked away again uneasily. She was afraid of such moments as these. It was to escape from them that she had protested so vehemently against their accepting Deane's offer of his cottage.

At low tide, a rough, pebbly road led from the village to the cottage, as well as the dyke footpath higher up. Along this came two people, a man and a woman, mere specks at first in the distance, but rapidly becoming more and more evident. They walked fast, and they looked always anxiously toward the tower, which stood out at the end of the road against the background of the sky—a curious, almost uncanny, sort of building.

"If they see us coming," said Ruby Sinclair, "they will certainly try to prevent our seeing him. Our only chance is to come upon them unexpectedly. They can watch the dyke path from the front, but few people ever come by this road. It winds about so, and it is generally thick with sea mud."

The man nodded. He, too, was keeping his gaze fixed in a strained manner upon their goal. "Now that we are so near," he said, "so near to him, we will make him speak. We will not be driven away. He cannot escape from us there."

There was a curious air of determination about these two, a certain grimness which seemed common to both of them, as they hurried along the rough, stone-strewn road. They had reached the last hundred yards now, and their course was perfectly straight. They walked single file along the little stretch of marshland which served as a footpath.

"He is in front, lying on a chair," she whispered. "They won't be able to get him in now before we are there."

The road terminated suddenly upon the beach. The man and the girl scrambled up a little shingly mound. When at last Winifred heard the sounds of their approach, they were already between her and the house. Any attempt at escape was useless. She came a few steps toward them.

"Who are you, please, and what do you want?" she asked quickly.

Hefferom stretched out a hand toward the prone figure of Rowan, who was lying there still with closed eyes. "We want a few words with your brother," he said. "We shall not keep him long, but it is very important. We have come a long way to see him."

"It is impossible," she said firmly. "He is very ill indeed. The doctor allows him to see no one. I don't know how you found your way here, but you must please return at once."

"I have come a long way," Hefferom said slowly.

"I am sorry," she answered, "but can't you see that it makes no difference? If you were to ask him questions, he is not well enough to answer you—scarcely to understand. Any sudden shock at all—even a recognition—might kill him."

Hefferom hesitated no longer. He pushed Winifred away, and motioned to Ruby to follow him. At that moment Rowan opened his eyes and turned his head. Hefferom walked toward him and leaned over his chair.

"You remember me, Rowan?" he said. "My name is Hefferom, Steve Hefferom. We were up the Newey Valley together, camped out, you know, at Prince's George, for more than a month—you and I and Deane, and a lot of us."

"I remember," Rowan faltered, trying to raise himself. "Yes, I remember!"

He had a fit of coughing. Winifred passed her arms around him and held him up. "If you stay," she whispered to Hefferom, "you will kill him. He ought not to speak even a sentence."

"It isn't much we want him to say, miss, Hefferom answered doggedly, "but there's a question he's got to answer. If he is as near death as you say, it can't make much difference what happens, and it means more than death to me and to this young lady."

Rowan had recovered sufficiently to drink from a glass which Winifred had handed to him. He turned once more toward Hefferom. "That is all finished," he said painfully—"those days. I am ill—too ill to talk, too ill to think, too ill to live! Please go.

Hefferom bent over him. "Rowan," he said, "you and I were never enemies, even if we didn't exactly hit it off together. Listen to me for a moment. Sinclair borrowed my last 300 pounds in Cape Town to come over here and lay claim to the Little Anna Gold Mine. He had the government deed with him. I have seen it. I followed him over to claim my share, and I found him dead, killed, and the paper gone. I am not asking you to give away your game, whatever it was, but we want the paper. This is Sinclair's niece with me, and I am his partner. We inherit his claim to the Little Anna Gold Mine, and we want that document."

"The document was not among Sinclair's effects when they were examined after his death," Rowan said. "I did not take it. I do not know what has become of it. That is the truth. Leave me alone now. I cannot talk any more."

His head dropped back upon his pillow. He was white to the lips. Winifred hurried to his side. Once more she turned upon the two.

"Are you satisfied?" she cried. "You have nearly killed him—for nothing. I know very well that no document of any sort such such as you describe has been found. If Mr. Sinclair ever had it, it was probably stolen from him."

"Stolen, yes!" Hefferom said—"stolen right enough! That is what we are here about. This young lady is his niece, and I'm his partner. What was left behind belongs to us, and, so far as I know, the only thing worth having was that document. We want it, and, by God," he wound up, "we've got to have it!"

"Do you imagine," the girl asked, without change of countenance, "that you will find it here?"

"I will tell you what I do imagine," Hefferom answered. "Men don't commit murder for nothing. Your brother tried to steal that paper, or rather he did steal it. The game's up now. He's no opportunity to make use of it, and it belongs to us. It belongs to us and we've come for it. There, now you know the truth. We've come for it, and we've come to stop until we get it."

Rowan raised himself a little in his seat. "Hefferom," he said, "it's no use talking like that. I haven't it. I'll be frank, frank as you have been. I know no more than you do who has got it. I quarreled with Sinclair, and he got suspicious. We fought in his room, and the result wou know, but I was arrested before I left the hotel. Everyone knows that. The paper—I never had it—I never even saw it. Where it is now God only knows. I don't."

Rowan fell back in his chair, coughing violently. For several moments he was incapable of speech. Winifred knelt by his side. When he had finished coughing, she held a wineglass to his lips and made him sip its contents. He lay back now as though completely exhausted. She turned to face these unwelcome visitors.

"You see," she cried, pointing to him, "a little more of this and you will kill him. Go away, both of you. He has nothing to tell you."

Hefferom laughed a little brutally. "Come," he said, "this game won't do. We are here for the truth, not to be put off with these fairy tales. It is the truth we want, and the truth we'll have, or I'll wring it out of him even if it kills him."

Rowan's eyes were closed, and he showed no sign of having heard. Winifred stood up boldly before him. "You are fools!' she said. "He has told you all he knows. If Sinclair ever had the deed you speak of, he parted with it to someone else, not to my brother."

"Someone else!" Hefferom repeated. "Do you take us for fools? If he parted with that deed, he parted with it for a fortune. Where's the money? Show us the deed or the money, and we are satisfied. Show us neither, and we'll not leave this place until he has spoken."

A step upon the shingle behind suddenly diverted their attention. The eyes of every one of them were fixed upon the tall figure who was walking swiftly up the slope. They had been so engrossed that they had not even heard the sound of the motor car which was standing there, splashed with mud, and with its engine still panting. With his glasses in his hand, and his long gray coat thrown open, Stirling Deane strode up to them.

"Come," he said, "it seems to me that I have arrived opportunely. What does this mean? Who are these people? Miss Sinclair, is this man your companion? What does he mean by speaking in such a tone to a dying man?"

No one answered him. Hefferom stood as though turned to stone, but his eyes never left Deane's.

CHAPTER VII.

Hefferom Is Optimistic.

RUBY SINCLAIR leaned forward and touched her companion's back as they flew through the village of Rakney. "Look," said she. "You see that cottage we are just passing That is where I have lived for the last four years."

Hefferom followed her outstretched finger. He saw the little grove of bare trees, and the marshland stretching out beyond to the bare sea. "Winter and summer?" he asked.

"Winter and summer."

He nodded. "About time you went fortune-hunting!" he said.

No other word passed between them until they reached the railway station. They descended from the car, and watched it almost immediately swing round and disappear.

"So this is the end of our little excursion to Rakney," Ruby remarked.

"Yes!" Hefferom answered. "Aren't you satisfied?"

"Why should I be?" she asked. "What have we gained?"

Hefferom drew a long breath. "Ah, I forgot!" he said. "You don't understand."

He drew her into the refreshment room. She declined to drink, but she sat in a corner while he disposed of several whiskies and sodas. At first he would say nothing, and she waited. Presently he began.

"You think," he said, "that I was a coward, because when Deane bundled us off in his car and told the man to drive up to the nearest railway station, I did not protest. You think that I should have made a scene there? It wasn't worth while. Deane's coming gave the whole game away. Don't you really understand?"

"Not a word," she answered.

"Listen, then. Stirling Deane is the man who is supposed to be the owner of the Little Anna Gold Mine, which was really your Uncle Sinclair's."

She looked at him with gleaming eyes. "Say that again," she said. "I don't quite understand."

"The deed which is missing from your Uncle Sinclair's effects," Hefferom said slowly, "is the title deed to the Little Anna Gold Mine. That mine was illegally taken possession of by Stirling Deane. He sold it to the company, of which he is now president, at an enormous price. He is the man with whom your Uncle Sinclair came to England to treat. Sinclair was murdered. By whom? By Rowan. Who was at the back of Rowan? Whose tool was he? We know! Chance this afternoon made everything clear to us. Can't you see that Rowan killed your uncle and stole that deed to save Stirling Deane from ruin—at his bidding, as his accomplice?"

"It takes my breath away," the girl murmured. "Now I think of it, of course, it is Deane's cottage they are in. He was there himself only a few weeks ago. It was through him that we heard of my uncle's murder."

"The whole thing's as simple as A B C," Hefferom declared. "Can't you see that Deane has given himself into our hands? Of course Rowan stole the deed! Of course Deane has it! He will have to pay for our silence! By God, he will have to pay!"

The girl looked up from her seat on the leathern couch, looked at her companion long and critically. "Do you think we can hold our own against a man like Stirling Deane?"

"It depends upon the cards, and they are in our hands. We must go back to London. We must wait till he is at his office. Then I will see him. You can leave the thing in my hands now. I shall know how to approach him. He cannot deny his friendship with the Rowans. They are occupying, even at this moment, his own cottage. Very likely I shall be able to discover other things connecting him with them. The newspapers you showed me spoke of great influence which was brought to bear on the granting of the reprieve. We may find that Stirling Deane was at the back of that. Anyhow, he is connected closely enough with them. I am here, ready to swear that when Sinclair left Africa he left with the original title deed of the Little Anna Gold Mine in his pocket. I think that the friendship between his murderer and Stirling Deane, who sold that mine for close upon a million pounds, is a thing that will need a little explanation."

"And in the meantime," said the girl bitterly, "we are starving."

"Not quite," he answered. "We have thirty-eight shillings. That will take us back to London, and find us rooms somewhere for the night. We must scrape along somehow until I can get to Deane's offices."

"You are not forgetting," the girl remarked, "that the thirty-eight shillings you are speaking of is my property?"

"We are partners," Hefferom declared. "You shall carry the purse if you will, but there is no object in it."

"You seem to do most of the spending," she reminded him. "If you think that we can afford it," she added, glancing at his empty glasses, "I should like a cup of tea."

He ordered it at once, and sat down by her side. "Look here," he said, "I don't see what you want to be so blooming stand-off for. Times are a bit rough with us just now, but, mark my word, we shall pull through all right. This man Deane is in the hollow of our hands. He has been Rowan's accomplice. No one who knows the facts could possibly doubt it. A word from us would ruin him."

The girl sighed. She had drawn a little away from the man. "Do you believe, then," she asked, "that Mr. Deane has the deed?"

"Either that, or it is destroyed," answered Hefferom. "But don't bother about that. Whether the deed is still existing or not, we know enough to make it worth his while to buy us, even though it costs him half his fortune."

"In the meantime," the girl said, "please get the tickets. The train will be in, in a few minutes."

"Come with me," he said suspiciously. "Remember, we're partners."

"Oh! we are partners right enough," she answered, rising and following him out of the place. "You needn't be afraid that I am going to let you go. Just now you are all that stands between me and a return to Rakney."

On the way up to town he began to build castles. He was optimistic, sanguine in the extreme. The girl listened almost stolidly. Her companion had begun to depress her. He was badly dressed, his linen was soiled, his imitation jewelry was hideous. He sat opposite her in the train, and there were things in his face from which she shrank. She was more than thankful that they were not alone.

"Are you tired, or what?" he asked at last, a little sullenly. "Surely I made it all plain enough? You don't doubt that there's money in this for us?"

"There should be," she admitted slowly. "And yet——"

"And yet what?"

"I have seen Mr. Deane before," she said hesitatingly. "I have talked with him once or twice. Somehow or other, when I think that it may come to be a struggle between you and him——"

He interrupted her with a brazen laugh. "You think I won't be able to stand up against him! Well, you shall see. There's a good deal in holding the cars, you know."

"You haven't the deed," she reminded him.

"I don't want it," he answered. "I am not afraid of Stirling Deane. I have known him a good many years, and he knows me. We are up against one another now, and you may fancy his chances; but I tell you my back's against the wall, and his isn't. He's there fighting in the open. I've got him, I tell you—got him!"

She half closed her eyes. This was not the way in which she had hoped to come into her fortune. In her heart, she could not believe a word he said. Deane was a strong man; Hefferom, she was already beginning to discover, was nothing but a bully and a craven. If it came to a duel between the two, she found it easier to believe that Hefferom would be worsted.

At King's Cross Station they separated. Hefferom, a little sulkily, accepted his dismissal, and parted with half of the money which he had.

"You can go where you choose," she said. "You can come back to Mrs. Towsley's, if you like, but I tell you frankly that except while we are on business I think it better that we should stay apart."

"I can't see why," he muttered.

"For one thing," she said, "we might be taken for adventurers. I do not know much about the law, but it seems to me you won't be very far out of its clutches when your negotiations with Mr. Deane begin."

"I can take care of myself," he answered gruffly. "Can I see you back to the old lady's, anyhow?"

"No!" she answered. "I would rather go alone."

"Come and have one drink in the refreshment room, just to wish ourselves luck," he oegred.

She went in with him and drank a cup of coffee. He had two liqueurs, and would have had more, but she dragged him sharply away.

"Remember," she said, "that I have nothing more I can raise money on. These few shillings are all we have. If Mr. Deane does not return for several days, we must leave."

"Deane will come back," he said, with a defiant laugh. "I let him have things his own way to-day, but he knows just where he is. Mark my words, he will be at the office to-morrow morning, and he will be there expecting to see me."

CHAPTER VIII.

A Bold Move.

HEFFEROM was over sanguine. It was three days before he was able to see Stirling Deane. During that three days he had lived on a few shillings, spent mostly in drinks. He swaggered into Deane's office, an untidy, dissolute-looking creature. His efforts to seem at his ease were almost ludicrous.

"A bit different, this, to the Newey Valley," he remarked, as he sat down without waiting for an invitation. "Things have gone pretty well with you, eh, Deane? Slap-up offices you've got, and the chink of money everywhere. It reminds me of what I've come about."

"You have come for money, have you?" Deane asked.

"Well, I don't know about that. I don't know how you look at it, but it seems to me that there's a bit owing, a bit which might come my way. I should tell you, perhaps, that I am representing Miss Sinclair as well as myself."

"Richard Sinclair's niece?" Deane asked.

"Exactly. She is heiress to anything the old man had, and I was partner with him in the Little Anna Gold Mine."

"In what?" asked Deane.

"In the Little Anna Gold Mine," Hefferom repeated distinctly.

Deane leaned back in his chair. "I must ask you to explain yourself," he said. "The Little Anna Gold Mine belongs to the syndicate of which I am a director."

"That's all very well for a bluff," answered Hefferom, "but you got rid of Sinclair a little too easily."

"Got rid of him?"

"Oh! I'm not thinking of this last time," Hefferom interrupted, with a hard laugh. "I am thinking of the time he put you on to the mine, and you took possession of it."

"It was perfectly legal," Deane remarked.

"Perhaps so—perhaps it wasn't," Hefferom answered. "Anyway, I know very well, and so, probably, do you, that Sinclair left South Africa six months ago, with the government title-deed of the Little Anna Gold Mine in his pocket. I advanced him the money to come, and he made me his partner."

"These are amazing statements of yours," Deane said. "May I ask where is this wonderful deed?"

"You may ask," Hefferom answered, "but not me. Better go to Rowan. He knows, though he keeps his lips tight shut. He knows, and so do you! Never mind about that. You don't want a lawsuit—no more do we."

"Who are 'we?'" Deane asked.

"Miss Sinclair and myself," Hefferom answered. "We are partners in this. I have come to you as a reasonable man. Sinclair landed in this country with the title-deeds of the mine which you have always considered yours, in his pocket. To-day he is murdered, and his papers have disappeared. He was murdered by Rowan, whom you are now befriending. There's a story there for the newspapers—there's something more than a story, Deane."

"Do I understand," Deane asked calmly.

"You can understand what you please," Hefferom said. "I want my money back, and I want big interest. And then there's the girl. She should be standing at this moment in your shoes. Half of the Little Anna Gold Mine is hers by right. It is for you to say what it would be worth your while to put down to close this business."

"Now," Deane remarked suavely, "you are talking common sense. But what I should like to know is, where is this wonderful title-deed?"

"Oh, d—n you, it's in the fire, I suppose!" Hefferom cried. "You and he know. Rowan's your man, and he's the sort to die game. But he didn't kill Sinclair for nothing. I wouldn't mind betting that that deed has been burnt to ashes, but even then, I know a little too much, eh?"

Deane shrugged his shoulders. "You know a great deal too much," he said. "I am to understand, then, finally, that you want me to buy your silence?"

"Put it that way if you choose," Hefferom answered, "only I warn you that I haven't come here on a child's game. This is big business—a big business for me and for the girl. She must have her share, and I mine."

"And the amount?"

"One hundred thousand pounds. Remember that it has to be divided."

"In other words," remarked Deane, "I am to buy your silence as to these matters upon which you have spoken, for the sum of one hundred thousand pounds?"

"It is too little," Hefferom declared. "The mine is worth ten times as much—the mine and your position."

"If I give you this sum," Deane asked, "do I understand that it closes the whole affair? You must remember that I do not admit having even seen this deed you spoke of. Supposing it turns up in somebody else's hands?"

Hefferom laughed ironically. "We'll guarantee you against that," he declared.

"That's easy to say," Deane objected, "but I don't see how. Come, I will be perfectly truthful. I haven't got that deed. If it should be still in existence, and be used against me after I have paid you this sum of money, I should be in somewhat an unfortunate position."

"There isn't the slightest fear of it," Hefferom said. "Besides——"

"Besides what?" Deane asked, looking up from his desk.

"It isn't as though the deed were a certainty," he said slowly. "Of course, the law is a little complicated. There would be witnesses on both sides, and the case might go anyhow."

"It would depend a little, I think," Deane said quietly, "on which side you gave evidence for. I think you could upset that deed if you chose."

"Perhaps I could," Hefferom said gruffly.

"Will you do it," Deane asked, "if it should ever be set into action against me? Remember that even though I know you will not believe me, the fact remains that although I have defended Rowan, I am not in possession of that deed."

Hefferom leaned across from his chair. "Listen, Deane," he said. "I am not here to bluff about that wonderful document. Perhaps it isn't worth the paper it's written on. Anyhow, here's my word for it. I'll see if ever an action is brought against you on the strength of that deed, that you blow it all sky high in five minutes."

"Is the deed a forgery?" Deane asked.

Hefferom did not answer.

"Or is it only the date?" Deane continued.

Still Hefferom was silent. Then, "There is no necessity," he said, after a pause, "of putting these things into plain words. You have only to find the money, and your anxieties are over."

Deane touched a bell by his side. "Yours, I am afraid," he answered, "are only just beginning!"

The curtains behind were suddenly thrown aside. A tall, spare-looking man stepped out. Deane turned toward him.

"Inspector," he said, "I give this man in charge for a barefaced attempt at blackmailing me. You have heard all that has been said. I don't think that there is anything for me to add."

He rang the bell by his side a second time. A moment later a policeman entered from the outer office. Hefferom, who had sprung to his feet, was glaring at them both, white with passion.

"So this is your game, Deane!" he exclaimed. "By the Lord, you shall pay for it! You to dare to use the law against me—you, who sent Rowan like a paid assassin to murder Sinclair!"

"A gross calumny," Deane answered calmly. "I had no interest in Sinclair's life or death."

"It's a d—d lie!" cried Hefferom. "If you are going to do any arresting, inspector, arrest that man!" he cried, pointing with his fat white forefinger to where Deane stood, debonair and well-dressed as usual, and with a little bunch of violets in his button-hole. "I tell you that he paid the man Rowan to kill Bully Sinclair in the Universal Hotel. I tell you I can prove it. I can prove this—that Sinclair left South Africa six months ago, with the deeds of the Little Anna Gold Mine, which this man dared to sell as being his own at close upon a million pounds less than six months ago. I can tell you more!"

They led him from the room, still shouting. At the door he turned back. "It's a bold game this, Deane," he cried, "but by heavens I'll cry quits with you before long! You think you have a case against me. I am only certain of one thing, and that is that you have driven a nail into your own coffin. If I could only get at you, you—you blackguard!"

His eyes were bloodshot. He strained and struggled to free himself from the grasp of the two men.

"I'd kill you where you stand!" he cried. "Do you think that I can be muzzled? Do you think that the truth won't come to light? People shall know it even if I never leave off telling it till my last breath comes."

Deane listened to him with immovable face. They got him outside at last. He heard him being dragged down the corridor, protesting all the time. Then he resumed his seat. "It's a bold game to play," he said to himself thoughtfully, "and yet, if they really haven't the deed, there was nothing else to be done!"

CHAPTER IX.

Lord Nunneley Is Frank.

"I ASKED you to lunch at the club, Deane," said Lord Nunneley, "because I thought that we could talk here without being interrupted. If you came to Cavendish Square, Olive would walk you right away from the table, and if I asked to have a chat with you alone, there would be a perfect avalanche of questions to face."

Deane looked up a little curiously. For the first time he realized that this was not simply a casual invitation. His prospective father-in-law had really something to say to him.

"There was some matter which you wished to discuss, then?" Deane asked. "I need scarcely say that I am quite at your service."

Lord Nunneley passed his cigarette case across the table. They were nearing the end of a very excellent luncheon. "Well," he said, "there were a few things I wanted to say to you. You see, Deane, the city is no longer a mythical place to us idlers. We meet people whose life is centered in money-making every day. I have friends, friends beside yourself, who come from Lombard Street, and one hears things, gossip, I mean, and stray talk."

Deance seemed suddenly to recede into himself. His host noticed the change, and blamed himself for his want of tact. Nevertheless, as he had begun, so he went on.

"You see, Deane," he continued, "Olive is my only daughter, and it makes one more than ordinarily cautious. This blackmailing case of yours has set people talking a bit. Of course, I think you were right. It was a brave and sportsmanlike thing to do. The man is committed for trial, and I only hope he'll get penal servitude. All the same, there are a lot of people, you know, Deane, who don't take quite the same view of it."

"Naturally," Deane assented. "One can scarcely occupy such a position as mine without having enemies. There are wheels within wheels in the financial world, you know, Lord Nunneley, just as there are in the social world. There are a dozen men who covet my post, and as many hundreds of hangers-on and parasites who would be glad to see me out of it."

"Quite so," returned Lord Nunneley. "Of course, this man Hefferom's attitude was distinctly belligerent, and his solicitors evidently knew what they were talking about when they reserved his defense. Tell me, when Sinclair came to you first had he really any papers at all which were likely to cause you embarrassment?"

"He had an original claim to the Little Anna Gold Mine," Deane admitted, "but it had lapsed before I took possession. It was not worth the paper it was written on."

"Still, he had got that document?" Lord Nunneley asked.

"Without a doubt," Deane answered.

"You have no idea, I suppose, what became of it?" Lord Nunneley asked.

"Not the slightest," replied Deane. "I only know that it was not found among his effects."

"Would it have been of any interest to you to secure it?" Lord Nunneley continued.

"I would have given a few hundred—perhaps a few thousand—pounds for it," Deane answered, "partly as a curiosity, partly in order to save any possible trouble."

"Of course," Lord Nunneley said, leaning back in his chair and sipping his coffee, "the world is full of people who love to gossip, and you cannot gossip unless you invent ill about some one. Somehow or other, it never amuses people to talk good of their friends; conversation only becomes interesting when one can associate evil with them. There are things being said in connection with this Hefferom affair, Deane, which are not altogether pleasant."

"Go on," said Deane.

"For instance," his host continued, "I was told last night that Hefferom's tale was in substance true—he did advance this man Sinclair money to come to England and assert his right to the Little Anna Gold Mine. Sinclair was murdered with this deed in his possession, and it is freely whispered that you have befriended Rowan—his murderer. The paper has disappeared. We know that. Still, there is a further rumor that it may turn up at his trial. If that case, wouldn't you be rather badly hit?"

Deane shrugged his shoulders. "The exact facts are these," he said. "Sinclair's claim to the Little Anna Gold Mine is worth very little. Nevertheless, he knew that any action he might take against me in the present state of our money market here would be somewhat disastrous. It would upset our credit and bring down our prices. Therefore, his idea, without a doubt, was to come to England and make a bargain with me. He didn't expect the mine. What he wanted was blood money. He came, and, perhaps unwisely, I would have nothing to do with him. Rowan was known to both of us out there. He came to see me a few days afterward, and I commissioned him to buy this deed, if he could. He went to look for Sinclair, they drank together, an old quarrel was revived, and they fought. The end of that you know. Where the document has gone to, I can't imagine, but I can assure you that it was never meant to be the basis of a serious claim, merely the foundation stone of a perfect system of blackmailing. If I had listened for five minutes to Hefferom I should have been in his power all my life. I should have lost my self-respect. Very soon I should have lost my nerve. I couldn't do it. I preferred to face him in a court of justice. He came to blackmail me, and he deserved to be punished. If he can prove that it is I who am the ill doer, I will take my punishment. I can say no more."

"You talk," Lord Nunneley said, looking at him kindly, "as I would have my own son talk. And yet, Deane, this whole affair is distressing to me. I tell you frankly that it has upset all the pleasure with which I consented to your engagement. I cannot bear that anyone associated with Olive should ever find himself in such a position. This case, of course, may go all in your favor, or it may not. If it does not, well, you know very well that it would be the beginning of very unpleasant things.

"Does Olive know of this little luncheon party of ours, Lord Nunneley?" Deane asked.

"She does not," Lord Nunneley asserted. "Olive is, above all things, stanch. She is, I believe, too, sincerely attached to you. I am speaking entirely for myself. I am speaking, too, as the father of an only daughter, whose engagement to you was, after all, a little experimental. I should like to see my daughter released from that engagement, Deane."

Deane smoked steadily for several minutes. Finally, "This is a little hard on me, isn't it, sir? I have only done what you yourself would have done—refused to have underhand dealings with men who made dishonorable propositions to me."

"It is hard on you, Deane," Lord Nunneley declared. "It is very hard indeed. But remember, I never wanted Olive to marry anyone in the city. I know you, and I like you. If you came to me with your hands clean and plenty of money, I should not hesitate for a second, for I believe that Olive likes you. But I hate scandal, I hate gossip, I hate notoriety! This blackmailing case of yours is going to result in all three. I'd like to go home and lay the case before Olive, and have your permission to say that if it seems good to her mother and myself, the engagement between you two is broken."

Deane leaned back in his chair. It seemed to him that he had so little time to give to thoughts outside the immediate trend of the day's work. It was proposed that his engagement with Olive should be broken. What did it mean to him, this engagement? How far into his life had she come? What place did she hold in his heart? His thoughts traveled backward. He remembered his almost meteor-like accession to wealth and influence. He remembered how all doors had flown open to him. He remembered and realized exactly where he stood. He thought of Lady Olive. He remembered the first day when he had decided that she was the woman who would look well at the head of his table, who would be a pleasant companion for him, and would insure his having friends, when he gave up his struggling, among the class of people with whom he desired to associate. It was in that way that he had looked at it from the first. Was it the same now? He had touched her hands. He had even kissed her lips. She had come into his arms and allowed him to embrace her, without any obvious reluctance. Only a few weeks ago she had kissed him voluntarily, absolutely of her own will. During their fortnight in Scotland she had shown herself more feminine than he had ever believed her. She had insisted upon taking him for walks by herself. She had taken his arm, encouraged him to make love to her, had deserted the bridge table in the evenings to sit in dark corners with him, had allowed him to hold her hand, even to snatch a few kisses. If she did not care for him, at least she was very near it. And as for him—he was fond of her, without a doubt. Somewhere in the background of his aprehension there was some shadowy idea of a greater thing than this, a love more thrilling, more passionate, more mysterious—music in the veins, which no Lady Olive in the world had ever created. But there was about these thoughts something absolutely unreal, fantastic. They had never taken to themselves shape, never became associated with any human being. They were nothing to trust to, he told himself—nothing. He looked out of the rain-swept window of the club. Curiously enough, he had a sudden vision of Winifred Rowan's quiet, set face. The memory of one passionate moment seemed suddenly to creep along his heartstrings like the wind over the strings of a harp. Such folly, he, thought, frowning! Such absolute folly!

(TO BE CONTINUED NEXT SUNDAY.)

MAY RULE MILLION WOMEN.

MRS. PHILIP CARPENTER

Of Yonkers, the Eastern candidate for the presidency of the General Federation of Women's Clubs, at the coming national convention of the federation, which will convene in San Francisco next week. Delegates from the Eastern States are unanimous in declaring that they will elect Mrs. Carpenter to the high office, while the Southern and Middle West delegates are equally certain that they will put their candidate, Mrs. Pennypacker, of Texas, at the head of their great organization, which boasts of a membership list of more than one thousand.

All About Money.

Police magistrates are, as a rule, familiar with slang terms for money. The late Montagu Williams of London, says an English writer, once asked a diminutive prisoner before him how he had stolen. "Well, yer worship," said the boy "I 'ad a pint o' mahogany, two door doorsteps and a stinker, that was a steever; and then a London mystery and a slice of spotted plain, and that's 'ow I spent the sprat." "I see," said Monty, to whom thieves' slang was an open book and added: "Seven days." Breakfast table problem: How much did the boy spend altogether, and what was the price of each item?